

Daddy's day(s) off work

Does the newly extended maternity leave echo that parenting is a mum's job? What of men who want in?

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Calling it a "humble gift" to women on the occasion of International Women's Day, the Lok Sabha on Thursday passed the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Bill, 2016.

The law, which now awaits the president's sign off, grants women working in the organised sector a paid maternity leave of 26 weeks, up from the earlier 12 weeks. While opinions on whether the new law will effectively benefit working women, or instead deter companies from hiring them stand divided, the topic of paternity leave continues to remain a bone of contention.

The underlying persuasion of the new law is also that child-rearing is a woman's job, even though the first provisions for paternity leave came from the government. In 1999, the Centre made provisions for male central government employees to avail of 15 days' paid paternity leave before or within six months of the child's birth. However, 18 years on, no law makes the same obligatory for the private sector.

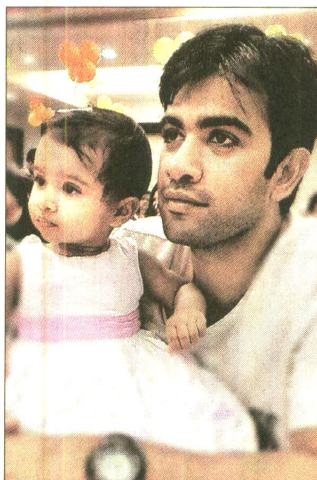
Left open to interpretation by private companies, it was only in 2005 that a few companies started offering paid paternity leaves, ranging from five days to a week. Cut to 2017, several private and multinational companies are now increasingly introducing paternity leave policies as part of their diversity and inclusion agenda.

"Earlier, we offered five days of paternity leave, but given the changing social fabric and the way we are hiring millennials, we revised the existing policy to 30 days," says Vikas Thapa, Vice President, HR, Cummins Group India.

From January, Deutsche Bank delinked gender from its parental leave policy, offering a paid leave of six months to men too if they happened to be primary caregivers. "Families are increasingly becoming nuclear and given the profile of people we hire, many younger people will need that time off. We have received positive feedback from both male and female employees since we announced the revised policy," says Madhavi Lal, Head, HR, Deutsche Bank India. Nitin Seth, COO of Flipkart, also weighed in, saying: "Flipkart mandated paternity leave policies to create a support system for its employees during one of the most



Kausik Misra with his one-month-old (left); Prasanna Jayakumar with his daughter



critical phases of their lives and to foster and inclusive work-life balance." The e-commerce giant offers 10 days leave to new dads.

Reverse sexism

To Union Minister for Women and Child Development Maneka Gandhi, such policies appear as lip service. After the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Bill 2016 was passed by the Rajya Sabha in August 2016, on considering a bill for paternity leaves as well, Gandhi reportedly said, "Men in India do not utilise their existing leaves in order to take care of their child. If men gave me an iota of hope, then yes, we can think of mooted a proposal for paternity leave. Let me see how many men do that. I will be happy to give it, but for a man it will just be a holiday."

Perhaps Prasanna Jayakumar could be that iota of hope that Gandhi is looking for. When his daughter was born in November 2015, Jayakumar's company, one of the top MNC beverage companies, did not have a paternity leave policy. "I asked the HR, but at the time they were still formulating one so I used my annual leaves and took two weeks off from work," says the 33-year-old. "I was sure from the first day that I was going to be hands-on with everything," he adds. As if testimony to his words, when we first called the doting dad, he said, "Can I call you back after feeding her?"

Although Amit Paul* has always loved children, he didn't think he had it in him to change diapers. "But day one, I was the first person to take on diaper

even asked me to take more days off than the policy mandates," says the 32-year-old who took ten days off.

Negotiable number

The number of paid leaves offered by companies differs. Most fathers agree a month would be ideal. "We realise our role is not as much as the mother," says Paul, "But you need to be there for your wife. Besides, there are other things that need to be done which are not baby-centric. Unfortunately in India, insurance and bill related formalities are not automated, so I had to run around doing those chores." Abhimanyu Daga, 31, who will be taking his paternity leave in April, says, "Even though I am yet to utilise my leave, I know that seven days will pass by in a jiffy."

It's been no holiday for these proactive fathers who have continued to balance parental duties with work. Jayakumar, who works up to 11 hours a day, takes his daughter to doctor's appointments and play dates. All men confess to becoming early birds since becoming fathers. "My work hours aren't fixed, so I prefer to wake up early and spend the morning with my baby before leaving for work," says Misra.

Cultural bias

Despite the father's willingness, at times the in-laws and grandparents distance them from their duties, unintentionally depriving them of a hands-on experience. "They'll say this is a woman's work and that I should leave it up to her and them," says Paul. Jayakumar concurs, "Typically, the elderly will give a hand with bathing and changing, even when I insist I want to do it."

Things are changing rapidly says an optimistic Jayakumar. "In my circle, at least four more friends turned fathers at the same time as me. All of them are hands-on. I don't know a single father who is not participative. The only thing a father cannot do is breastfeeding," says Jayakumar. "Apart from that, he can contribute as much as the mother. It's only the mindset that needs to change. It's really a bond between one human being and another."

"It's natural for babies to develop a strong bond with the people who are with them from the beginning," says 35-year-old Satish Lanka, who is father to a six-month-old. "If you don't give men the chance, you can't say they aren't being participative," concludes Jayakumar.

(*names withheld on request)

ON PATERNITY LEAVE

Five days: Infosys, PwC India
One week: NIIT, Accenture
10 days: Flipkart, Godrej, Intel India, Asian Paints, PayPal
Two weeks: Syntel, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Microsoft India, Hindustan Unilever Limited, GSK Consumer Healthcare
Four weeks: Google India, Star India
12 weeks: Cisco Systems India
16 weeks: Facebook India
— Compiled from media reports

duty," says the 36-year-old who became a father to a boy in May 2016. "It came naturally to me," he adds. While he wasn't aware of the paternity leave policy at the time of his joining the company, he enquired with HR and "availed the one week paternity leave, and went on leave from the day my wife went into labour."

Many fathers agree that a supportive boss and team, more than policies, play a significant role in taking leave from work for parenting duties without guilt. "My boss and team knew my wife was expecting," says Kausik Misra, who works in the marketing division of a leading television channel that offers a week's paternity leave. "Three weeks before the baby was born, I was given the least work. They divided the work among themselves because they knew I would have to run at any moment since the delivery date is always tentative. My boss